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AUTHOR Riley, William K.
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ABSTRACT

Public interest in language is strong, as evidenced by recent articles on spoken and written forms of contemporary English in major news magazines. The December 8, 1975 issue of "Newsweek" contains several allegations, notably by Mario Pei, castigating linguists for causing the decline in writing ability in the United States. In this paper an attempt is made to refute each of Mario Pei's accusations, citing the published work of various structural and other linguists. It is suggested that the fault for his and the public's misunderstanding of what linguists actually believe about language is partly on both sides. The well-known CCCC paper referred to in the "Newsweek" article offers evidence that poorly understood linguistic information results in well-intentioned but misdirected policy shifts among educators. Linguists have a responsibility to make the results of their research available to society in terms which are accurate and clearly understandable. Their failure to do so has resulted in their being blamed for events not under their control. It is noted that there are some possible real causes for the writing problem mentioned in the "Newsweek" article, and the contributions linguists might make to the effort to find a solution are discussed. (Author/CHK)

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MISREPRESENTATION OF LINGUISTICS IN THE MEDIA

William K. Riley

In the past few years public attention has been drawn to the English language in America by several events which were widely reported and commented on in the media. One of these events was the watergate affair, especially the televised hearings and the published transcripts of the secret tapes. The language used by the various government officials was not only characterized by excessive obscenity and profanity, but also designed to obfuscate and mislead, for example by the use of common public words with private meanings.

Echoes of Stuart Chase's well-known "Gobbledygook" and George Orwell's "political language" reverberated from the walls of the committee's hearing room, and were caricatured in the comic strips.[1] Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury," for instance, parodied a presidential news conference in language so like the actual speech of former president Nixon and his aides that it almost wasn't funny:

> Dan Rather: "Sir, could you comment on the latest Harris poll, which indicates a continued erosion of the faith of the American people in your personal integrity?"
> Mr. Nixon: "Mr. Rather, as quick on the draw as this president is with candor and full disclosure, the American people--the overwhelming majority of which, I might add, as you ladies and gentlemen and, let me just say, our friends at CBS know!"[2]

Such verbal evasion tactics on the part of prominent public figures is of course not new, and in fact is one of the hallmarks of the politician in public utterances. What was perhaps unexpected was the discovery from the secret tapes that this same kind of vague, imprecise, and ill-structured language was used in private as well as public situations. Since most of the speakers were putatively intelligent and well educated, many people began to wonder how their English could be so unclear, not to mention inelegant.

Then during 1975 several reports of various national studies rekindled public interest in the state of verbal and other abilities among Americans. A University of Texas survey funded by the U.S. Office of Education found that "23 million American adults, one in every five, lack the basic know-how to function effectively in a complex society."3 This conclusion was based on an assessment of the proficiency of a sample of 10,000 adults in reading, writing, computation, and problem solving. Thirteen per cent thought a "credit check" was a substitute for cash. Fourteen per cent, which if extrapolated to the entire population represents 16.5 million people, couldn't write a check well enough that a bank could process it. And twenty per cent could not understand what was meant by a company's sign stating "we are an Equal Opportunity Employer."

Another study reported that the scores of high school seniors on the College Entrance Examination Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests had reached their lowest point in more than twenty years.[4] The scores began falling in 1963, but "the drop for the class of 1975--10 points on the verbal test and 8 points on

the math--was the largest since the scores began to decline." This article was followed by an editorial in the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot (13 September 1975) entitled "A Nation of Ignoramuses." In it the editor explains that one possible cause for the lower scores on SAT's is "the shift in recent years away from traditional studies to more innovative ones--'new' math instead of old, linguistics instead of rote spelling." Obviously the writer is not quite sure what linguistics is. But he nevertheless leaves his readers with the impression that linguistics is an innovative modern method for teaching spelling!

The article that prompted that editorial (7 September 1975) reported that:

> Dr. James Kinneavy, director of freshman English at the University of Texas, attributed the test score drop to a 'dialectical tolerance' among high school teachers trained in new linguistics. This theory holds that any ethnic dialect of English is as good as standard English and hence, standard rules of grammar and punctuation are considered unimportant.

Again, linguistics is inadequately and inaccurately characterized by the press.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Dr. Kinneavy, who is apparently concerned about students' imprecise use of English words, uses the adjectival form of the word "dialectic" rather than what I believe is the more accurate adjectival form of "dialect," which is "dialectal." Of course, he may have been misquoted, but someone in the writing and publishing business did permit this inexact usage to be printed.

In the fall of 1974, a front-page article in the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot reported differences in scores on a standard reading test for students in the Richmond and Norfolk public

schools. In the article it was noted that one school system had been using a psycholinguistic approach. The reporter then defined his terms for the reader. "Psycholinguistics is a teaching method by which students are encouraged to guess at unfamiliar words, based on sentence structure and story content."[5] Unfortunately, the media here are supporting a mistaken notion which is widely held by both the general public and many educators.

All this concern about the state of the English language finally led to the publication of a cover story in Newsweek magazine on December 8, 1975, entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write."[6] This article described the well-documented fact that many Americans, especially college students, are incapable of constructing orderly, precise, lucid, logical, written standard English. It would be hard to deny the existence of the problem, though it might be argued that it is not an entirely new one, except perhaps in its current size and range. Practically anyone who ever taught English at any level has a drawer full of more or less hilarious examples of poor writing, and several examples are actually printed in the Newsweek article.

But the author, Merrill Sheils, takes it as given that there has been a massive degeneration of writing ability among Americans in recent years, and goes on to describe some of the possible causes, as well as several remedies that are being tried in various parts of the country. It is in the identification of the causes that linguistics is again grossly misrepresented to the public. Along with television and schools of education, structural linguistics is named as a possible cause for the decline in ability to write well.

The responsibility for this claim lies with Mario Pei, who is carefully identified in the Newsweek article as a philologist, rather than a linguist, and "many language experts," who are not named. I rather suspect that there is in fact only one "language expert" whose views are reported, and that he is Mario Pei. This seems likely because of the similarity of the unnamed experts' opinions and what is quoted from Pei.

To understand Pei's antipathy toward linguists, it is important to know what a philologist is as opposed to a linguist. According to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, philology was originally "love of learning or literature; hence, the study of literature, in a wide sense including etymology, grammar, criticism, literary and linguistic history, etc." I have deliberately consulted this older dictionary (1931), because its definitions are based on those of the Second Unabridged version, and Pei indicates in his remarks for the article that he dislikes the newer Webster's Third Unabridged.

A philologist then is a scholar whose interest in and study of language is primarily concerned with literature, the learned and written form of a language. Recently "philologist" has sometimes, as the dictionary notes, been used as a synonym for "linguist." But neither Mario Pei and other philologists nor any linguists I know use the term in such a fashion. To the linguist, the primary object of study is the language, and if there is a written form of it, and perhaps a literary tradition, that is also interesting and important. But it is by no means the only object of a linguist's study, nor even perhaps the most important part of it.

Mario Pei's personal preference for the written forms of language has led him into conflict with those who prefer to consider a whole language as the proper subject for investigation, and he has picked only one small group from the many to inveigh against, the structural linguists. Pei makes several general and specific allegations about the behavior and beliefs of structural linguists, and all are false as he states them.

First, he "warns that already much of academia is controlled by" these linguists.[7] The idea that linguists of any kind control any significant part of the academic world is ludicrous. Most universities in the United States do not have a department of linguistics, and even in those that do, such a department is not in any way in control of the university, and in fact usually has, it is sad to say, very little communication with or influence on any other departments. Furthermore, where there are linguists, these days they are rarely structural linguists. It is an indication of Pei's ignorance of the field that he is apparently not aware of the fact that linguistics is currently dominated by transformationalists, stratificationalists, tagmemicists, variation theorists, and a mere sprinkling of structuralists, because the dominance of that group of linguists effectively ended about fifteen years ago.

Second, he "traces the predominance of this school to the 1961 publication of Webster's Third International Dictionary," (p. 58). This is a truly bizarre statement! Pei, with many others, it should be noted, believes in only one of the two main traditions of thought about the function of a dictionary.

He believes that a dictionary should legislate the "correct" use of the written language. Philip Gove, the general editor of Webster's III, believes, with many others, that a dictionary should record the use of the language.[8] The only tie the lexicographers at Merriam-Webster had with structural linguists was that they, too, believed in describing accurately the state of the language as it actually is, rather than as one thinks it should be. The publication of the dictionary did not establish the dominance of structural linguistics, which had been around for thirty years or so, and was, in fact, on its way out in 1961. Nor did structural linguistics determine the form of Webster's III. A clear understanding of the nature of language, and the relationship between its written and spoken forms, had been gained many years before structural linguistics arose.

One of the greatest language scholars in American history, George Philip Krapp, had published the following astute observations in 1909 in his book Modern English: Its Growth and Present Use.

> In all study of language as expression, it is now generally maintained, by those who have given much thought to the matter, that the spoken, as compared with the written or literary language, is of far greater importance. It is mainly in the speech of men and women as they come into direct social relations with each other that language develops and grows in a natural, untrammeled, and effective way. From one point of view, the language of literature is merely an approximate transcription, more or less remote, of the language of speech. It is from the latter that the language of literature is derived, and it must always return to its source to renew itself when, as it constantly tends to do, it becomes attenuated and outworn. From this it follows that the study of the spoken language is helpful not only for what it reveals about effectiveness in conversation, but for the clues it offers about effectiveness

in literature as well.

Popular opinion is not usually in accord with this view of the relative importance of speech and writing.[9]

It appears, then, that Mario Pei is unaware of a long and distinguished tradition in the study of language which has existed in scholarly circles since long before the rise of structural linguistics in the 1930's.

Pei claims that structural linguists preach "that writing is a secondary, unimportant activity."[10] It has already been shown that linguists long before the 1930's were saying that writing is secondary to speech, and less important as a subject of study by scholars who are trying to explain human languages as a whole. But "secondary" does not mean "unimportant." It means that writing is an activity derived from speech; that where there is language there is first speech, then possibly writing; that most human linguistic events are now, and have always been, speech.

A leading popularizer of the structural linguists' point of view was Robert A. Hall, Jr., who published a book entitled Leave Your Language Alone! in 1950, which was later revised and re-issued in a paperback edition in 1960 under the name Linguistics and Your Language. It is perhaps more than mere coincidence that Pei says structural linguists preach "that we must not try to correct or improve language, but must leave it alone" (p. 58). Since that quotation seems to refer specifically to Hall, it is worth finding out what Hall said about the relation of speech to writing. In the paperback edition, Hall states that "[writing] is definitely subordinate in historical

origin and in present-day function to...[speaking]."[11] But on the next page he adds, "Of course writing is very useful, and no intelligent person would deny its great value and its extension in our modern civilization." And, "without speech itself, all human society as we know it would be impossible; without writing our highly complex civilization would be impossible." Finally, to make it as clear as possible what structural linguists actually did believe about the relation of speech to writing, Hall notes (p. 32):

> It is perfectly true that writing is very important in our modern civilization, and that there are even some things we can do with writing that we cannot do with speech; but it still is less important than speech.

It may be possible to partially explain the antipathy Pei seems to have for Hall and the structural linguists. First, of course, a philologist, defined as a lover of learning and letters, may feel threatened by being told that his subject is not the most important part of language study. And second, Hall was not exactly tactful and polite to Pei and other philologists. At the end of the paperback from which I quoted earlier, Hall lists other sources for information on the nature of language, with comments about them. Here (p. 203) he says:

> Two books need especial mention as something to be avoided: 16. The Loom of Language, by Frederick Bodmer and Lancelot Hogben (New York: Norton, 1944); and 17. The Story of Language, by Mario A. Pei (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1949). Both of these attempts at popularization cater to all the traditional misconceptions we have tried to refute; prescriptive dogmatism, misunderstanding of the relation of writing to language, and ethnocentric value-judgments. Both are pretentious, full of out-of-date notions, misinformation and misinterpretation, and are wholly misleading.

Hall's book is fairly representative of the works of the latter-day structural linguists, though perhaps a bit more hyperbolic and dogmatic than the works of other linguists of that school. It will be useful, therefore, to contrast the dogma Pei attributes to them with the beliefs they actually held as reported by Hall. Some of these beliefs have undergone considerable revision among the various theoretical orientations of contemporary linguistics, but they are still quite different from Mario Pei's understanding of them.

First, Pei claims that structural linguists think "that one form of language is as good as another."[12] The crucial problem here is the definition of "good." Hall addresses this problem, and decides that "'good' language is language which gets the desired effect with the least friction and difficulty for its user."[13] Quite clearly this does not constitute a claim that "anything goes." Rather, it is a realistic statement of something every speaker of any language whatsoever learns at a fairly early stage of his life--the kind of language a speaker uses depends on the whole set of circumstances surrounding his linguistic usage--who is listening to him, or reading what he writes, why he is speaking or writing, where and in what social context he is using language.

And Hall goes on to say (p. 27) that:

> 'Good' style is simply that style of speaking or writing which is most effective under any given set of circumstances. When we speak of 'good style,' what we usually mean is clarity, absence of ambiguity, orderly structure, and the like--and these are, indeed, important in most situations. But they are not the same thing as type of language, and 'good style' is possible in any dialect.

But this is surely very different from claiming that one form of a language is as good as another under any circumstances at all, as Pei seems to be claiming the structuralists say!

Just for fun, let us play Pei's game for a moment, and turn the tables on him. Assume that his counterclaim to the structural linguists would be "one form of language is better than any other." I think we could assume that form would be formal, standard, written American English. If this were true, and context were irrelevant for determining the kind of language we should use, how would we speak to a filling station attendant? There are obvious problems involved in writing to him. But would anyone seriously maintain that proper use of language would require us to speak to him as though we were reading a formal written request?

> How do you do, sir? My name is William Riley. The gasoline tank in my automobile presently contains somewhat less than one gallon of liquid fuel. Since it is my intention to operate my vehicle for a length of time sufficient to transport me over approximately another two hundred miles, I wonder if you would kindly replenish my supply of petroleum fuel to the actual capacity of the container in the automobile, for which service, of course, I shall reimburse you?

The kind of language used depends on the circumstances surrounding its use, a fact of which the structural linguists are well aware. Mario Pei, and the magazine which quoted his remarks, both misrepresent linguists in this instance.

Second, Pei says that structural linguists believe "that at the age of five anyone who is not deaf or idiotic has gained a full mastery of his language."[14] I will ignore the implied equation of deafness with idiocy, since this is so obviously an error that it needs no refutation. What is important in this statement is the noun phrase "a full mastery." Assuming

that "full mastery" is synonymous with "complete mastery," the statement is false no matter to whom it is attributed. We may ask, rhetorically of course, whether a mastery of a language includes a knowledge of its vocabulary. We may then answer that it does, and go on to ask whether there is likely ever to have been a human being who knew all the vocabulary of his native language. My own reply, and I think the structural linguists would have agreed, is in the negative.

The same sort of argument can be made with regard to sentence constructions, especially in view of the fact that there are numerous dialects or varieties of a language, and no one human has full mastery of all of them. It can be said, then, that no person ever gains "full mastery" of any language, whether he be five years old or 105.

But did the structural linguists really say what Pei claims they said? The answer is probably that they sometimes said something almost like that, but not quite the same. Hall says, "The child who comes to school at the age of six already knows the basic structure of his own language...."[15] To be fair, he also says, "at six, the child already has as firm a grasp as he ever will have of the structure of his language, with the exception of a few loose ends still to be picked up" (p. 193). Recent work in psycholinguistic research has indicated that there may be more than just a few of those ends. Nevertheless, properly understood, Hall's statement is still a fair representation of structural linguistic belief, and true.

The difference here is what is meant by "basic structure" as compared to "full mastery." Children of five or six do indeed have command of the basic structure of their languages,

in that they know how to produce a potentially infinite number of statements, questions, commands, requests, and exclamations, all of which will obey the grammatical rules of their languages. There are still many alternative constructions, stylistic devices, and vocabulary items that they do not know, and may never learn. But a command of the "basic structure" of a language nevertheless suffices to enable a six-year-old to produce and understand completely novel utterances which conform to the grammatical rules of his native tongue. This is no mean accomplishment for a non-linguist, especially since it is true that no linguist has ever come close to succeeding in an attempt to describe even so basic a set of grammatical rules, despite centuries of sophisticated attempts to do just that.

Third, Pei declares that structural linguists maintained "that we must not try to correct or improve language, but must leave it alone."[16] Of course, if he read only the original title of Hall's book, Pei could be expected to interpret it in exactly that way. Within the book, however, Hall says several things that qualify his hyperbolic and deliberately attention-grabbing title statement. For instance:

> Often enough, we may find we need to change our usage, simply because social and financial success depends on some norm, and our speech is one of the things that will be used as a norm. In a situation like this, it is advisable to make the adjustment; but let's do so on the basis of the actual social acceptability of our speech, not because of the fanciful prescriptions of some normative grammarian or other pseudo-authority.[17]

Clearly Hall is well aware of the fact that speakers may need to learn to alter their language to suit the situations they desire to find themselves in. And in many places throughout his

book he makes it plain that he, and, we assume, other structural linguists, admit that there may be valid reasons for changing our language usage. But he is at pains to note that such changes must proceed only from a clear and accurate comparison of the actual usage a speaker has with the actual usage he wants to have.

But all this is still at the level of the individual speaker. Hall understands that individuals may find it expedient to "correct or improve" their language. Perhaps what Pei means is that structural linguists say we shouldn't try to correct or improve the whole of a language, for instance, English. I couldn't locate a concise and trenchant quotation from a structural linguist to use as a refutation of this idea. The reason may be that no structural linguist, nor any of the various modern linguists either, could imagine any such suggestion being seriously made. The whole of the long recorded history of human language attests to the absolute futility of conscious efforts to revise languages to conform with some would-be expert's ideas of what they should be like. Who has the authority to determine what would constitute an "improvement" in English, and from whence comes that authority? How would the "improvement" be taught to the speakers of English? How would speakers who didn't learn it or refused to use it be punished, and by whom, and with what authority? Even in the few nations where governments have actually established official groups whose duty is to control the standard language, those groups have met with almost no success. Their languages

continue to change, adapt to new situations and products, borrow useful things from other languages, and generally go their own ways. To suggest deliberate tampering with an actual language is to illustrate a complete lack of understanding of the nature of human language.

The basic problem with Mario Pei, the language expert, is his naively narrow view of what language is, a classic misapprehension of the relation between speech and writing. He says that structural linguists, of whom it is by now clear he does not approve, preach "that the only language activity worthy of the name is speech on the colloquial, slangy, even illiterate plane."[18] To the linguist, who is careful to be precise in his use of words, "colloquial" means "characteristic of spoken language," and has no pejorative connotations. It is hard for the linguist to imagine speech that is not characteristic of the spoken language. To the linguist, "illiterate" means "not able to read." Many humans are not able to read, often because their languages simply are not written. This does not mean that they are therefore incapable of clear thinking, elegant expression, or creative activity. The time is not so long past even in English-speaking nations when persons of great social influence, even great intellectual ability, could also be said to be illiterate. No linguist has ever to my knowledge maintained that slang was the only linguistic activity worthy of the name. But perhaps it will be informative to find what Mario Pei thinks slang is.

In a book published in 1958, Language for Everybody, Mario Pei addresses himself directly to the problem of refuting

Robert A. Hall, Jr. In that book he makes it clear that he advocates the establishment of a single, invariant form of English as a standard, and that form should apparently be the variety of written English used by Mario Pei. To justify such a suggestion, he says:

> High standards of material civilization oppose the conservation and spreading of dialects and favor uniformity. Variety, the spice of life, is picturesque and soul-satisfying to the ego, but standardization is more convenient.[16]

Of course, anyone familiar with research in paleontology, biology, psychology, sociology, and economics, not to mention ecology, will realize that diversity is more than merely "picturesque and soul-satisfying to the ego;" diversity is actually a sine qua non for survival, whether in biological mechanisms, ecosystems, or societies.

Pei goes on to define slang "as a substandard form of speech that is generally intelligible to the entire population, or at any rate to the majority of the speakers, whether they choose to use it or not" (p. 59). The term "substandard" can be used only when there is assumed to be a single, uniform kind of speech which is somehow the best, therefore standard, in all situations of language use whatsoever. But so long as there are different people with different personalities doing different things in different places, conditions which must be met for a culture and society to survive, there cannot be such a uniform standard. There can be many standards, of course, each with its own appropriate domain, and that is the situation in the world today, and always has been.

Pei's examples, in a table entitled "Interaction of Slang and Dialect," (p. 61) show that in fact he does not know what either slang or dialect is.

Pure nationwide slang: I ain't got none!
Jeet? No, joo?

Big-city slang: Getting gout!
Hey, youse guys!
So long, toots, I gotta blow now!

Slang, touch of dialect: Dey're a bunch o' joiks!
Them's them!

Big-city dialect, touch of slang:
An' I don't never git no breaks!
I'm gonna take de goil to Pros-separk (Prospect Park); she's an inside dame all week, a seketerry at the liberry.

Dialect, touch of slang: I ain't hear'n tell of it.
If I'd a knowed it was you, I'd a retch out an' wove.

Pure dialect: I was sittin' on a stoop at Toity-toird Street an' Foist Avenoo.
The score is nary-nary in the ninth, with us'uns to bat.
He-brutes is ornery critters!

With few exceptions, these examples are almost all respellings to indicate what turn out to be perfectly natural and normal aspects of the pronunciation of English in connected speech. Again it seems that Pei's orientation is to the written form of language, which he believes we should all try to speak. And where the standard orthography permits a choice of alternate pronunciations, he would make one standard and the other substandard. For instance, he respells one word "Avenoo," changing the final "ue" to "oo." Now, that respelling matches my normal pronunciation of the word, and I consider myself a speaker of a standard variety of English. But there is support in the standard orthography for representing either /yu/ or /u/ with that same "ue." For instance, there is "cue" as in "pool cue" and "hue" where no speaker of any dialect is likely to say /u/.

Then there are "flue" and "true" where the likelihood of /yu/ is vanishingly small. There is a well-known variation between /yu/ and /u/ in "due, dew, do, sue." But we are assuming that letters determine pronunciations, and that there are only two possible choices for the letters "ue"--what about "guess"? "unique"? "quest"? "duet"? Again Pei seems to lack an understanding of the relation between speech and writing.

Newsweek further reports, "'If you will scoff at language study,' asks Pei, 'how, save in terms of language, will you scoff?'"[20] There are written records, spanning thousands of years, which attest to the fact that linguists, structural or otherwise, and their antecedents, will not scoff at language study. The very word "linguist" means "a student of language." How, then, are we to interpret Pei's question? The answer appears to be that to Mario Pei the written form of language, and only that form, is really language. Speech which is not literate, that is, as close as possible to a perfect match of sounds with graphic symbols, or colloquial, that is, not written, is in his opinion not real language. It is clear that he not only does not understand structural linguists, but also has a defective understanding of the very subject which is presumably closest to his heart, language.

Sheils goes on to say, probably prompted by Pei, that "many teachers...take the view that standard English is just a 'prestige' dialect among many others...."[21] Perhaps it is true that many teachers take that view. I certainly do. But Newsweek attributes that view to "[t]he pervasive influence of the structural linguists, coupled with the political activism

of the past decade...."[22] The implication is that such a view of standard English is not only false but also probably part of a Communist plot!

As a matter of fact, the belief that standard English is a prestige dialect among many other dialects is a matter of fact. A dialect is a variety of a language. There are many dialects of English, even excluding Caribbean, British, and East Indian English. And yet, wherever English is spoken, there are speakers who speak what their hearers admire as standard English, though it differs from one place to another. And wherever there are persons with power and prestige, the majority of them speak standard English. And wherever there are persons without power or prestige, they are almost all speakers of a nonstandard variety of English. We have only to refer to the history of a nation like England or France to see that it is the dialect of the city or region which becomes the center of power and prestige which becomes the standard for the nation, regardless of any purely linguistic characteristics. And wherever there is more than one such region, there is more than one standard language.

We might note that the differences between dialects are most widespread and noticeable at the phonetic level, that is, in pronunciation. The well-known mismatch between the written form of English and its pronunciation in various dialects makes it possible for a single standard spelling to represent any of a number of different pronunciations. Writing thus conceals the differences that are actually contained in speech, and this may be one factor that leads Mario Pei to believe that the

written language is real and standard as opposed to the spoken language.

It is my contention that Newsweek among others of the printed media, has misrepresented linguists and linguistics, partly through the words of Mario Pei. The article from which I have quoted attempted to place the blame for the current inability of many Americans to write well. This problem obviously has something to do with language. I would have thought that a careful writer would have tried to find out what linguists, who are professional students of human language, believed to be the cause of the problem. Most American linguists, and many foreign linguists, are members of the Linguistic Society of America, which annually publishes a list of the names and addresses of its members. And yet, not a single one of them, if we may judge by the citations in the article, was consulted.

Who did Merrill Sheils quote? A partial list includes Mario Pei, who carefully avoided identification with linguists; Marshall McLuhan; Karl Shapiro, the poet; Jacques Barzun, a historian; Ronald Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; an unnamed personnel official for the Bank of America; James Dickey, another poet, and a number of other nonlinguists. None of the persons quoted by Sheils is apparently qualified to report the linguists' opinions and beliefs, and yet the linguist is labeled as one of the culprits for the increasing lack of ability to write well. Thus are linguists and their discipline misrepresented, and not represented at all, in the press.

I would like to discuss briefly what I believe to be one reason for this fact. I am afraid it is partly the linguists' own fault.

There is among professional scholars whose specialty is the study of human language a tendency to indulge in what is sometimes called "gee whiz linguistics" when dealing with scholars from other disciplines and with the general public. Gee whiz linguistics typically oversimplifies and sensationalizes the basic tenets of modern knowledge about the nature of language. The linguist who resorts to such techniques, and I confess I sometimes do so myself, is usually trying to compress large amounts of research findings into a pithy statement which contradicts some folk notion about language.

The previously mentioned statement that standard English is just a 'prestige' dialect among many others is an example. While it is true, it is much too broad and sweeping a statement as it stands, and needs much qualification in the way of information about the nature of and reasons for variation in language. For example, there is not just one standard kind of English spoken in a geographical region as large and diverse as the continental United States.

It is gee whiz linguistics which has given linguists a reputation for being permissive about language. That title, Leave Your Language Alone (1950) by Robert A. Hall, Jr. is a good example of gee whiz techniques.

But the indulgence in gee whiz tactics on the part of linguists is one reason their work is not better understood by the media and the public. There is also sometimes a mistaken

belief among linguists that all the old traditional notions about language have long since been disproved and discarded, and that those battles need not be refought. But the folk traditions are much too firmly planted in the public mind to be so easily uprooted. If he is not to continue to be misrepresented, the linguist must take advantage of every opportunity to publicize what is currently known or believed about the nature of language. And he must do so without indulging in gee whiz tactics.

The recent policy statement of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, entitled "Students' Right to Their Own Language" is evidence that knowledge of the nature of language is being disseminated to teachers.[23] The statement is generally very carefully worded, logically reasoned, and supported with examples and details. But it has received widespread public excoriation, probably partly because it is explicitly concerned with the facts about dialects, their effects on student writing, and teachers' reading of that writing. What this indicates is that the public still does not know what linguists know about variation in language.

There are two main ways in which I believe linguists can contribute to the solution of problems in teaching writing. First, we should be publishing and lecturing about linguistic variation, and not simply in professional society journals and conferences, but in media to which the public has access. Composition teachers must be able to distinguish between problems which come from interference of student dialects and those which come from a lack of knowledge of the methods of organization, clarification,

and argument in writing. In order to do so, they need to have an understanding of the specific ways in which dialects differ from each other. And if teachers are to be allowed to deal sensibly with these two different kinds of writing problems, the general public, including city and state legislators and administrators, school boards, and parents, must also be aware of what dialect differences are and what they mean, or perhaps more crucially what they do not mean.

Second, linguists should be publishing and lecturing about the relationship between speech and writing. All too many people still believe that writing is the "real" language, and speech simply an imperfect and inferior derivative from writing. A recent news article in the Norfolk (Va.) Virginian-Pilot (15 February 1976) quoted a professor at Loyola University of Chicago as saying:

> The perennial argument as to what is the meaning of Chicago is not as important as the fact that what was definitely transmitted by the French was a French word, not an Indian word because the Indians had no writing. (emphasis added.)

The implication is that, since the Indians had no writing, they had no words, and indeed no language.

It is unfortunately true that many linguists react to such nonsense by simply laughing, and taking a linguistically-more-sophisticated-than-thou attitude. Such people seem to consider their knowledge about language a store of arcane information which the public has no business knowing and for which there is no practical use. But the holders of such knowledge do indeed have a duty to make it available to the rest of society, if only to prevent their being publicly identified as part of the problem with language, rather than as part of a potential solution.

Let me make it clear that when I advocate the publication of information about language, I am not restricting publication to regular, planned, formal situations. There must be very few people these days who would argue that learning takes place only in the classroom in an officially sanctioned environment with the traditional teacher, textbooks, and students. The converse is also true--that teaching does not take place only under such circumstances. Wherever there is someone who knows something, and knows how to impart it to others, teaching and learning can occur. This may just as well happen in the letters to the editor of a newspaper or magazine as in a high school or college classroom. And it may ultimately have more effect in such a publication than it would have in the classroom.

Linguists and linguistics are regularly misrepresented in the media, though this is partly the fault of the linguists themselves. Their errors are both of omission and commission. Public statements of the gee whiz type are ultimately misleading, and must be replaced by carefully qualified and documented arguments. And whenever inaccurate or unwarranted statements are made publicly about language or linguistics, linguists must respond quickly and carefully in whatever medium is available to them.

The linguist's contribution to the teaching of writing must generally be indirect. Linguists are not usually qualified to develop methods and materials for the teaching of anything but linguistics. But it makes sense to insist that people who do teach writing have a clear understanding of both the relationship among the varieties of a language, and the relationship

between speaking and writing. And these are matters about which linguists are qualified to speak.

Let me conclude with two cautionary notes about the role of linguistics in the controversy about teaching writing. First, among those who do not understand linguistics, and share Mario Pei's belief that linguists are partly responsible for the decline in writing ability, there are some who advocate a return to the older, pre-linguistics approach to grammar and composition. An article by a retired Jefferson County (Ky.) English teacher taking this position was reprinted in the Norfolk (Va.) Ledger-Star on 27 January 1976. One revealing statement, which was headlined "We need more old-style grammar in schools," went as follows:

> Furthermore, since punctuation is tied to terminology derived from Latin grammar, such as independent and dependent clauses, restrictive and nonrestrictive phrases and clauses, not to forget appositives and double negatives as well as other terms the student must know to punctuate correctly, how in the world is he ever to learn to punctuate when lost in a maze of linguistic terminology?

The writer is so familiar with his own "maze of terminology" that he does not notice it, though it is equally as forbidding to modern students as the linguistic terminology is to the writer of the article. But modern linguistics is not in itself a method of teaching writing, and neither was traditional grammar. Both are systems for the analysis and description of a language, and judging on that basis, any of several linguistic descriptions of English is more accurate than traditional school grammars. There is no reason to believe that returning to an inaccurate, though perhaps more familiar, descriptive framework will have any effect at all on writing ability.

A second note of caution must be offered for those on the other side of the fence, those who think modern linguistics is a wonderful improvement over traditional school grammar. Such persons are often looking for a panacea, something which would solve all the language problems in the public schools at once. And all too often they see linguistics as just such a panacea. The public schools in a large city on the East Coast were convinced several years ago, by a well-intentioned but misinformed administrator, that the adoption of linguistically modern textbooks in English classes throughout the city would automatically produce graduates who both wrote and spoke perfect standard English!

Of course, the adoption of the texts did not produce the desired result. And this should not surprise anyone who has occasion to read the writing of most of today's well known linguists. Knowing about the nature of language and linguistic variation is a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for being able to write well and teach others to do so.

Despite media claims, then, linguists are not responsible for any putative decline in ability to write. And though they may contribute indirectly to the teaching of writing, they have no direct contribution to make as linguists to the development of either methods or materials for composition courses.

NOTES

[1]Stuart Chase, "Gobbledygook," in Power of Words (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1953) and George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1945).

[2]Garry Trudeau, The Doonesbury Chronicles (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), n.p.

[3]"Millions Lack Citizen Skills," Norfolk (Va.) Virginian-Pilot, 30 October 1975.

[4]"High School Senior Slump," Washington Post, 7 September 1975.

[5]The date is missing from my clipping.

[6]Merrill Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek, December 8, 1975, pp. 58-65.

[7]Ibid., p. 58.

[8]Philip Gove, "About the Dictionary," American Scholar, 32 (Autumn 1963).

[9]George Philip Krapp and Albert H. Marckwardt, Modern English: Its Growth and Present Use (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 9-10.

[10]Newsweek, p. 58.

[11]Robert A. Hall, Jr., Linguistics and Your Language (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 35.

[12]Sheils, Newsweek, p. 58.

[13]Hall, Linguistics, p. 27.

[14]Sheils, Newsweek, p. 58.

[15]Hall, Linguistics, p. 192.

[16]Sheils, Newsweek, p. 58.

[17]Hall, Linguistics, p. 29.

[18]Sheils, Newsweek, p. 58.

[19]Mario Pei, Language for Everybody (New York: Pocket Books, 1958), p. 58.

[20]Sheils, Newsweek, p. 61.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Melvin A. Butler et al., "Students' Right to Their Own Language, A Proposed Position Statement," Conference on College Composition and Communication. Spring 1974. (Mimeographed.)